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Liz Douglas's 'Seeds of Time 2'

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Seeds of Time 2

Salix Fragilis L. - Crack Willow
Salix Phylicifolia L. - Tea leaved willow
Salix Purpurea L. - Purple Willow
Salix Cinerea L. - Grey willow
Salix Repens L. - Creeping willow
Salix Aurita L. - Eared willow
Salix Caprea L. - Goat willow
Salix Cinerea L. - Grey willow
Salix Pentandra L. - Bay willow
Salix Viminalis L. - Osier

At first glance the inventory of the botanical and conventional names of willow species pinned up on Liz Douglas's studio wall suggests the seemingly detached concern of the cerebral scientist. Yet, another look shifts the list's impression to a poetic evocation, an incantation even.



It is between these possibilities of investigative research and vibrant imagination that Douglas's abstract canvasses move, not as oppositions to each other, but as fluid interchanges.

The first striking impression on encountering Liz Douglas is the care with which she approaches her work. She is assiduous in her mental and actual preparation and in the attention she pays to every aspect of its production and appearance - from the canvasses to the selection of the pigments, colours and painting media. Indeed, Douglas's relationship to and involvement with her work is defined by a level of dedicated concern which resembles that bestowed on a beloved thing or person. A painting such as *Ettrick Series: "Slow Thaw"* is the end result of a long process that may take up to two years.



Slow Thaw

During this period Douglas concentrates solely on this one piece and related studies, which help resolve the work. A further example of Douglas's attention to detail lies in her choice of the materials she uses. They aim to be environmentally sensitive – there is none of the toxicity of past art. Douglas mentions Helen Frankenthaler's works that posed such difficulties for conservators due to their impermanent nature. Cases such as Frankenthaler's resulted - luckily for artists now – in the manufacture of materials that are both amenable to conservation and - lest we forget - the artist's own health.



Pink

All this may not be evident at first glance when one is in the presence of Douglas's paintings. Abstract art now furnishes corporate offices and has even entered advertising and packaging design. Neither painting nor abstraction today have the artistic cachet they possessed as the pinnacle of modernist art during a large part of the 20th century. Despite this deposition both practices continue and have thrived again in recent years. Witness the number of significant international painting exhibitions and the global standing of the Scottish abstract painter Callum Innes. Contrary to its deceptive simplicity, abstract painting is a difficult mode of practice whose ubiquity belies its intricate nature in the hands of a dedicated artist.

The complexity of Douglas's work is due to the substantial research she undertakes. This comprises an extensive and painstaking collection of the details of plant species, especially willow pollen, and collaboration with botanists and other scientific specialists. Her research takes her into the habitat of the willows of the Ettrick Marshes in the Scottish Borders where she lives. It includes the study of willow habitat throughout the year by means of extensive drawing, photography and the gathering of actual plant specimen. These are then further examined under a high resolution electronic microscope at Edinburgh's Royal Botanical Gardens. It is these studies that resonate in Douglas's paintings in the appearance of semi-abstracted forms (see, for example, *Ettrick Series: "Yellow Light"*).



Yellow Light

One key result of Douglas's plant studies was her realisation that hybridity within one species is a crucial characteristic of natural processes. This fact is usually unknown to the lay-person nor necessarily discussed in TV nature programmes which inform most people's knowledge of natural science. Apparently, there is much cross fertilisation amongst the eight species of willows found in the Ettrick Marsh. Hence, the notion of 'purity' within any one species or group, as sometimes perceived by ethnic purists and fundamentalists of different persuasions today, simply does not hold in the natural environment. It would appear that there are more lessons in nature for which some of us bargained. This is true even allowing for the fact that one has to be cautious to draw simple equations between nature and society.



Moths Return

Unlike high modernist abstraction which is often seen as the epitome - and last gasp - of romantic artistic self-expression, Douglas's self-definition as an artist lies in her mediated enquiry into the world around us. This examination is as much directed at herself as at others. Her response to being asked when a painting is finished is that it has to surprise her by something that she did not anticipate when starting it. And yet her investigation also reveals something to us as viewers that we had not noticed before or not noticed in quite such a way. Her measured approach is not fashionable in the speed-driven environment in which we find ourselves. At its best, such art slows us down, brings us to our senses in an immediate, visceral way.



Transition

Douglas's canvasses come to embody the distillation of her engagement with the minutiae of an aspect of reality that is beyond our usual threshold of perception. They are the equivalent of her accumulated knowledge and experience, not a literal representation of specific findings, although – as already indicated - the shapes, forms and marks of her canvasses echo the specimens under the microscope.

Paintings such as *Seeds of Time 2* respond to the larger question of 'what is left to say for artists about the landscape' when photography has long taken over as the medium that defines our visual relationship to the environment. Douglas's work also updates the endeavours of earlier British artists such as Constable or Turner who probed into 'the processes that shape nature' and, in the case of the former, professed wanting 'to paint the changeability of the world.'¹



Seeds of Time 2

That this is done here in the language of abstraction is an indicator of the versatility of art today and more specifically the fact that the old division between representational, figurative and abstract art has ceased to be of importance. While predominantly abstract, Douglas's paintings are rooted in her thorough training in representational, figurative art and her continuous observation of the 'real' world. Moreover, figurative elements in the form of telling lines, suggestive marks and representational forms appear throughout. The American philosopher and writer on art Arthur Danto has said: 'No art is any longer historically mandated as against any other art. Nothing is anymore true as art than anything else.' Regarding the loss of abstract art's predominance today he has said: 'In post-historical art (abstract painting) is but a possibility, something that one can do if one *cares* to do it.'²



Drawing

In Douglas's case, the nonfigurative representation of shapes and images is the result not of an escape from the real world or a vague pointer to the transcendental as in much 20th century abstract painting but, as indicated above, of a committed and specific engagement with the world. Furthermore, in the

context of the history of 20th century abstraction there are reverberations in her paintings of both the linear geometry and the 'spontaneous' gestural mark making and paint application which defined – and divided - earlier abstract art. This can be seen in the painterly canvasses of Kandinsky and later, Pollock or Frankenthaler compared to the calibrated linearity of Mondrian and, more recently, Bridget Riley. In Douglas's paintings such oppositions co-exist and even become united.

In other respects Douglas's canvasses revise earlier theoretical positions and definitions of abstract art as a 'purely optical art' (Clement Greenberg). Her paintings engage the viewer as both image and object - not only his/her eyes but also the body. According to the phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty meaning or sense and the sensory are inextricably intertwined. A work of art's meaning does not lie 'behind' it, as is commonly asserted, but its material or sensuous form and its symbolic value or cultural coding together entail or 'perform' its meaning. Douglas is well aware of this. Her choice of colour (Potter's Pink, an almost lyrical crimson, is a favourite), canvas size and texture, achieved by multiple layers over a period of months, culminate in 'a singular effect of spatial presence'.³ The physicality of the works as objects, the tautness of their surface, the particularity of the different weaves of the canvas fabric, the depth of the stretcher are crucial, as Douglas stresses in conversation about her work. Much time and thought is therefore also spent on the installation of the work in the gallery to ensure that its material, almost tactile presence becomes enhanced for the viewer. The merit of such viscerally conceived art provides a welcome antidote to the screen images which have become so much part of our lives.



Pink

Fusing rigorous inquiry with sensuous visualisation, the non-figurative with (elements of) the figurative, Douglas proves herself as a local artist in the best sense of the word in that her approach to her immediate environment encompasses the global. Her quietly sumptuous canvasses show an awareness of the interconnectedness of natural and social processes. The success of her

abstract aesthetics lies in communicating this to the viewer, palpably and - imaginatively.

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Ruth Pelzer-Montada, PhD, is an artist and lecturer in Visual Culture at Edinburgh College of Art, The University of Edinburgh.. Her essays on contemporary printmaking have appeared in national and international journals and online.
Email: r.pelzer@ed.ac.uk

¹ Andrew Graham-Dixon, *The Secret of Drawing*, BBC 2, 8 October 2005

² Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 149

³ Frances Colpitt, 'Systems of Opinion: Abstract Painting since 1959' in: Colpitt, F. (ed) *Abstract art in the late twentieth century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, p. 179